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ANNIVERSARY SERMON

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

Bellows Falls, Vt.

Rev. A. P. Pratt, Ph. D., *Pastor*

Sunday, November Thirteen

Nineteen Hundred Ten

1850

1910

91



A Survey from the Heights

Sermon preached Sunday November thirteenth
on the occasion of the Sixtieth Anniversary of
the First Congregational Church Bellows Falls
Vermont by Rev. Arthur Peabody Pratt, Ph. D.
Pastor of the Church.

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Text

Get thee up into the high mountain. *Isaiah 40: 9. pt.*

In response to various requests

THIS SERMON IS PUBLISHED
BY THE BUSINESS COMMITTEE

— J. C. Day, V. N. Deming, D. F. Pollard —

For distribution among the members
and friends of the Church and Parish

Anniversary Sermon

Sunday November 13, 1910



TEN YEARS AGO, in the year nineteen hundred, this church celebrated its semi-centennial; to-day we are observing its sixtieth anniversary. Some one may say that ten years is all too soon to remind a people of the passing of time, and that even six decades is of small significance measured against the background of history. I would remind you that time is not always to be measured by years and decades, but by important events.

Sixty years—the age of this church—is a long time in the life of a man. It is more than half a century. It covers many more years than the average length of human life. It is about twice as long as the active career of a strong man. The last sixty years are of special interest since some of the greatest events of the world's history have occurred within this time. During this period, it is safe to say, more movements which have had in mind and have brought to pass the well-being of humanity have been undertaken than at any other time in the life of the human race. This morning I desire to deal with but one-sixth of this period,—only a decade.

Ten years is indeed a short time—only a tenth part of a century. When we look forward ten years seems like a long time, to the sick man it must seem almost inter-

minable. Yet after ten years have passed that period seems very short and its beginning but as yesterday.

The last decade has been the most momentous that we know anything about. Across the seas empires have been overturned, and republics set up so fast that monarchies are becoming out-of-date. Russia, Turkey, Portugal and Spain have heard the clamor and felt the throbbing pulse of discontented people and are as yet in a state of transition. The far east has witnessed more changes in this time than in any other century, or possibly in any ten centuries.

Some of these changes have come about as splendid triumphs of the progress of a people through enlightenment; but others have been ushered in by the horrors of war, and by intrigue and assassination. Peace has had her victories during this time, both in the Hague Tribunal and in the advance of arbitration as the recognized way of settling differences between peoples and nations. Wonderful have been the strides of invention and the discoveries in science. Men talk through space, fly in the air and travel under the sea; on land the rapidity and comfort of transportation is nothing short of marvelous. Electricity has been the wonder-worker of this decade. We live at a feverish pace. Men and women break down under the strain of this high pressure. In no age of the world has a decade been so filled up, pressed down, shaken together and run over as these last ten years, the first decade of the twentieth century.

When we come closer to the life of the Church we realize that in this period there have developed conditions which are discouraging, and which make our problem one to tax the mind and test the heart. Many

people brought up under Christian influences are not in the church, and frankly state that they do not care for its services. The multiplication of secular attractions has turned the old Puritan Sabbath upside down, and has largely created these conditions. Such a combination of circumstances as now confronts the Christian Church causes the minister to feel that the problem is indeed great. On the part of professing Christians there has been confusion of thought. Foundations of faith have been examined, and earnest thinking men and women have honestly sought to reconcile with the teachings and traditions of the church the latest teachings of science and philosophy. For the most part good has resulted and the splendid Bible courses of study which have appeared during the last decade bear witness to this assertion. While our faiths and our philosophies have been severely shaken and tried, our social conventions also have been subjected to a testing of their moral worth. This same period has also been critical in industrial and political life. Long established institutions have been stirred to their depths, and their records exposed to the scrutiny of keen-eyed men. Public officials, by the score, have been found untrustworthy, yet how can we expect them to follow a higher rule if in every community it is taught that the chief end of man is to make money? It has been a decade of commercialism, and the disgrace of our cities has been and is "the shame of commercialism." During this time our wealth as a nation has increased many-fold, and with this increase has come menacing aggregations of capital with their tremendous power. We are reminded that a plutocracy has arisen and in many communities there has been developed an ever widening breach be-

tween the wealthy employer of labor and the wage-earner. Our nation supposedly made up of free men, a nation which boasts of equal rights and the fair deal, is being forced to recognize a rapidly growing tendency to separate the people into antagonistic classes. Occasionally there appears a symptom—"an ugly symptom of the hatreds and resentments that are threatening the life of this republic." It is high time that we concerned ourselves about social conditions likely to entangle us when we are unwary, and which, if not corrected, will undermine our American institutions.

Let us turn our thoughts to another phase of this decade of feverish energy and rampant commercialism. In the turmoil of the struggle of the masses and the confusing roar of the street traffic, in the blare of trumpets of an unprecedented militarism and the loud boasting of a nation increased in goods, we are likely to lose sight of the quiet Teacher and we do not hear His message for very noise. Throughout the sixty years of the life of this church, and especially during the last ten years there have been consecrated Christian workers, followers of the Teacher, who have heard His message. There have been faithful toilers out on the western plains and among the mountains. In faraway lands and in the islands of the sea there have been missionaries of the cross, all bearing witness to our Lord Jesus Christ. That these years have witnessed the organizing of more movements of Christian purpose than any other similar period we do not question, and in these movements the Christian layman has had a conspicuous place. The Christian minister has preached and pled for the betterment of the lot of the afflicted, and has sought to inspire the workers.

In the vision of the Hebrew seer, an ideal band of messengers is bidden to 'go up into a high mountain' and see from afar the coming of the Lord. Then these heralds are to lift up their voices without fear and proclaim the glad tidings. Centuries have come and gone since the days of Isaiah, but the message of his vision remains with us. Men and women continue to go up into the high mountain to watch and pray for the coming of the time when the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ. It has been granted to us, as a Church of Christ, to have some share in this blessed hope. There have been seasons of devoted interest in the life of this church during which the people have labored with diligence, and progress well merited has crowned their toil. Then there have been periods when the work lagged because of the forgetfulness of the workers. Is it not because there are so many interesting and alluring things to attract our attention and to take our time that we become unmindful of the true mission of the church? It is easy to lose sight of the supreme purpose and the supreme opportunity if we allow ourselves to become too greatly involved in the petty affairs of life. Dr. Babcock sounded a timely warning in his words:

We are not here to play, to dream, to drift,
We have hard work to do, and loads to lift,
Shun not the struggle; face it. 'Tis God's gift.
Be strong!

It is now time for us to 'get up into the high mountain.' We desire a survey from the heights, because it is true that from the lofty outlook one's vision is extended and the horizon is enlarged. We

shall then appreciate that certain great facts are standing out in remarkable clearness. One of these, I believe, ought to have our consideration before we interest ourselves in the more intimate affairs of our own history. I have reference to the great and marvelous changes which have occurred within the last decade, evident in nearly every department of man's activity. This fact of change in our manner and method of living and working, together with the attendant necessity of adapting one's self to the altered conditions, cannot be ignored by the church without loss to herself, a loss which is bound to impair efficiency. Along with this there is the fact of an increased demand consequent upon these changed conditions. As we recognize that the supreme duty of the church is to reveal God to man, it behooves us to study changes and to concern ourselves with our opportunities and all-pressing needs. Our deepest desire is for wisdom that we may do our work well, and have some part in the bringing in of the Kingdom, before the gates of time shall close behind us.

We shall behold from our vantage height the years stretching back into the somewhat vague past; the doings of the nearer decade are easier to note. It will be natural to inquire as to what the church has been doing and, more particularly, what Congregationalists have been doing. Then we shall want to know about our own activities, and shall doubtless seek here and there for the more familiar landmarks of our history. All the while, whether upon the height or in the lowland, we must watch and pray for that

One far-off divine event

To which the whole creation moves.

The forming of a national interdenominational brotherhood, the outcome of which was the Federal Council of Churches, was of signal moment to the church. Of far-reaching significance has been the laymen's Missionary Campaign and the development of the Congregational Brotherhood. Our denominational benevolent Societies, through an aggressive "Together Campaign," succeeded in wiping out their debts, and have been brought into closer touch in this co-operative effort. The American Board has celebrated Centennials, both in Williamstown and in Boston; the National Council of Congregational Churches has more nearly approached the hope of the earnest men and women of the denomination who desire a coming together of all our missionary activities and the sense of denominational oneness. The apportionment plan has been developed, and is both sane and businesslike. Let us note here that the response of this church during the last decade to the appeal of Benevolence has been generous, and in advance of the average church of its size. Yet the giving is not as general or as wide-spread as is desirable. Something from each person, each person giving according to his ability, would materially strengthen both the benevolences and the finances of this or any church. We ought to bear in mind that giving is a form of worship, and that worship without giving is truly grotesque. Not only does withholding of gifts make impossible the proper support of missionary activity and of the public worship of God; it also tends to paralyze the very life-centres of one's spiritual expression. The joy of having is in the giving; the withholding is what tends to poverty of soul.

At such a time as this we naturally look over our records. The present pastorate is the fourteenth in the history of this church.

Rev. Joel R. Arnold,	1850—First year of organization.
Rev. John G. Wilson,	Oct. 1851—Oct. 1852.
Rev. Elijah Bonney,	1853— Six mos.
Rev. Samuel E. Day,	Feb. 1855—Oct. 1857.
Rev. Isaac S. Perry,	Jan. 1858—June 1862.
Rev. Samuel S. Gardner,	Oct. 1862—Apr. 1864.
Rev. Moody A. Stevens,	Oct. 1864—Oct. 1867.
Rev. Cyrus Hamlin,	Oct. 1868—Mar. 1874.
Rev. Nathan F. Carter,	Oct. 1874—Mar. 1879.
Rev. Alfred B. Dascomb,	June 1879—Sept. 1890.
Rev. J. Ellsworth Fullerton,	Mar. 1891—Oct. 1897.
Rev. John H. Reid,	Apr. 1898—Apr. 1903.
Rev. J. T. Stocking,	Oct. 1903—Sept. 1905.
Rev. A. P. Pratt,	Apr. 1906—

In almost every instance there was an interval of some length between the different terms so that the average time of pastoral service has been a little under *four* years. The pastorate of Rev. A. B. Dascomb was by far the longest, his ministry extending over eleven years. During the last decade three pastors have served the church, Rev. J. H. Reid's stay extending from 1898 to 1903, Rev. J. T. Stocking remaining from 1903 to 1905, and the present pastorate beginning in 1906. The pulpits of our sister churches have witnessed similar changes. Excepting the Congregational Church in Saxtons River where Rev. G. F. Chapin has labored for more than a quarter of a century not one of the pastors who were here when I came to Bellows Falls, less than five years ago, is here today. Across the way in the Baptist Church Mr. Moore has followed Mr. Jackson;

Mr. Sanford, rector of the Episcopal Church has been succeeded by Mr. Wilson; Mr. Eaton takes the place of Mr. Leavitt in the Universalist Church; Mr. Davenport is the second minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church since Mr. Sherburne left this field. Mr. Mason is with the Baptist Church, at Saxtons River, following Rev. Mr. Brown who so ably filled the pulpit up to the time of his death. - Vermont Academy has begun a new regime as a school for young men under a new principal, Dr. G. B. Lawson, during this short period.

Turning from these to our own organization we feel that we have been signally blessed. Though we have been called upon to suffer sore and heavy losses as noble men and women have been called to higher service, and though we find it increasingly difficult to fill the places made vacant through removals, the loyalty of our people has ever been a source of inspiration, and their willing sacrifice a cause of rejoicing and a fund of power. It is with thankful hearts that we note two of our present members who have been members of this church for one-half of a century: Hon. A. N. Swain united with the church in 1857 and Mrs. Helen B. Jackson in 1860.

Although pastorates have been, as the rule, of short duration, the terms of service of our church and society workers have been exceptionally long. At the present time two of our four deacons, Dea. H. C. Johnson whose service began in 1876 and Dea. C. W. Osgood who was elected in 1880, have served through three decades; Dea. J. B. Morse has served through one decade. One of our deaconesses, Mrs. C. W. Osgood, has served more than three decades; another, Mrs. H. M. Leonard, more than two.

Dea. N. G. Williams, *Superintendent emeritus* of our Bible School was superintendent of the school for almost thirty years. Dea. Osgood, organizer and teacher of the "C. W. Osgood Bible Class," has taught in the school for forty years. Miss Alice H. Jackson, our present director of music, was for fifteen years, superintendent of the primary department of our Bible School. Bible School teachers who have served for more than a decade are Mrs. L. R. Downing, Mrs. D. F. Pollard now superintendent of the primary department, Miss N. M. Davis and Mr. F. S. Adams. Mr. Ned Pierce has had charge of the Bible School library for nearly fifteen years. Miss Abbie Leonard was secretary of the Christian Endeavor Society for ten years.

Our church records for three decades have been kept by our present clerk, Fred C. Hildreth, (Mr. Hildreth was clerk of the Society from 1880 to 1889, when the church was incorporated; since then he has been clerk of the church). Dea. Johnson, our collector, has been the able assistant of the treasurer and business committee through two decades. A considerable number of men have given more than a decade of service in various offices: Mr. J. C. Day, the present chairman of our Business committee, has served on this committee terms covering in the aggregate more than twenty years.

Service extending over considerable time has been freely given by our members to the state and national denominational work. The American Board of Foreign Missions, in whose corporate membership Dea. Osgood has served since 1890, the Vermont Domestic Missionary Society, of which Dea. Williams has been vice president since 1899; the State Sunday School Association, the State Christian Endeavor Union, of which one of our

number was a director for more than a decade, the Woman's Board of Foreign Missions and the Home Missionary Union — all of these have had reason to testify to the loyalty of the workers of this church. I find ample evidence of this same willing response as I review the history of Union Association. During the years we are observing from our anniversary height, neighbor-needs were not neglected. Mr. E. G. Osgood with others, maintained Sunday School and Christian Endeavor work at Lawrence Mills, seven miles away, for more than ten years; meetings were conducted also in Rockingham and Upper Meadows a number of months each year.

The church edifice was re-dedicated, September 10, 1905, after a season of repairing and renovating, at which time some needed additions were made. Gifts presented to the church on that occasion were the Offering Plates, additional Deacons' Chairs, Bible for the pulpit and some pictures for the Bible School rooms. Among recent gifts are a picture of Sir Galahad and two national flags from the Beta Pi Boys' Club.* We entertained the Vermont Sunday School Association in 1908, and just at present we are looking forward to the Vermont Congregational Conference, which is to be with us in June, 1911. It is worthy of note that our mid-week meetings continue to be led by our members — a unique and helpful practice now in its third decade; also that our Bible School offerings are given for various beneficences.

Is it not quite natural that we should turn to the

*On the occasion of the present anniversary the Christian Endeavor Society, active during the larger part of the decade, presented to the church a handsome Kneeling Rest for Baptism.

Year Book on such an occasion as a church anniversary? Ten years ago, in 1900, our membership was 262, today we report 344. During these years there have been received into our church 247 persons, 110 on confession and 137 by letter. Letters have been granted to 83, and 27 of our members have been removed by death. Some names were removed when the Roll was revised, and others remain still in the Absentee list. The average membership of the Bible School for the decade, including the Home Department, was 298; of Young Peoples' organizations, 71. There have been 194 baptisms; 63 adults and 41 infants. The church has contributed \$13,172 to various benevolences within the decade and to home expenses over \$35,000.

We must not be misled into judging our work too largely by statistics. We must consider the cumulated influence of the life of the church, the going forth of consecrated workers, whose devotion and sacrifice are an honor to Christian manhood and womanhood, into all parts of our own land and to the lands beyond the sea. It is a source of great joy that within this last decade two young men, members of our church family, have been ordained to the Christian ministry and are now in pastorates—the Rev. C. C. Adams of Essex Junction, Vt., and the Rev. R. W. Roundy of Hartford, Conn. Then there is the other phase to which reference has been made—the participation of our workers in denominational activities. In addition to this there is that contribution to work not distinctly denominational and in some instances not at all identified with the church. This is of interest because the present Citizens' No-License Committee, organized by one of our men, the Vermont C. E. Union, of which one of our

former members was president for ten years, the Y. M. C. A. and the Anti-Saloon League, as well as other philanthropic movements have drawn liberally on our people and the response has been generous.

Our women's organizations have witnessed similar devotion as thought and time and strength have been given without reserve to the work of the church. The treasurer of the Woman's Missionary Society, Mrs. L. S. Hayes, has held that office since 1888. In the Ladies' Union Mrs. Edward Arms and Mrs. G. H. Gorham and Mrs. Ned Pierce have served as president, secretary and treasurer for a decade, and others have rendered valued assistance in committee work. Thus in these departments; in the Bible School; in the work with men and in the work with boys; in the children's concerts and entertainments there has been a generous outpouring of service and of gifts which I know has often meant sacrifice.

Dr. Jefferson on one occasion said, and I repeat this statement because it so comprehensively expresses my own thought in this matter: "The non-church-going world has no conception of the enormous volume of labor which is given by professing Christians for the purpose of making the world a brighter place to live in. When I read the shallow and ignorant criticisms of the Christian Church, written sometimes by men who ought to know better, I wish they could for at least one year have a personal knowledge of what Christian men and women are doing in a single church."

No one but God knows so well as a minister the amount of work which his church is doing, and when I think of the hours and days and weeks which many of you have given within the last ten years for the ad-

vancement of God's Kingdom, my heart goes out to you with a tide of gratitude which cannot be uttered, and I pray that God may reward you richly for all that you have done.

I realize also that my task as a preacher is a difficult one, for the work of the minister is, in root, to report the Gospel to man. He is not primarily to make his hearers satisfied with him, but dissatisfied with themselves. He must organize and inspire the scheme which is to be carried forward and realized by the enlisted faithful. It is largely the contemplating of the temporal in the light of the eternal—not sectarian controversy or theological topics, but that “something which the world cannot supply,” which the people themselves personally cannot supply, and for which they come to the place of prayer, hoping that the preacher will turn their thoughts into the way of holiness, and their steps into the path of peace.

I come now to the close. Our survey has been general and we have looked out in all directions. At such a time as this we have good reason for such a proceeding. It is worth the while to stop for a brief season, in the midst of our routine rush, and regular program, to enjoy the change which this rest affords. As a church you halted ten years ago and spent three days on a Mount of Vision from which you looked over the past and planned and prayed for the future. Then you journeyed on, and for ten more years you have continued on your way. I have asked you to pause a moment, to rest and review, to look out over the field of your achievement from a slightly greater height, for all along you have labored onward and upward.

There is something inspiring in climbing a mountain. It may be what is called the "lure of the heights," and that indefinable joy one experiences as he ascends a little nearer to the sky. A few weeks ago I had the great satisfaction of being on the summit of Mt. Washington on a magnificently clear day. The journey up the mountain side was strenuous—that is quite the fit word to describe the rough climbing over rock and ledge where there is no trail. But, after all, the climb is merely an incident as one toils upward catching only an occasional glimpse of the far away summit. The great fact is the command of an ever widening outlook, and the vision of increasing distance, height and grandeur. Mountain beyond mountain, range upon range come into view, while valleys deepen and far-away lakes glimmer in the sunlight. When steady climbing brings one to some jutting ridge from which the climber can gain a new outlook with landscape stretching away into wide expanse, a feeling of power comes over him. Difficulties are being met and perils overcome and the range of vision seems limitless. He pities the people of the lowlands; those who are far down the slope or shut in the valley cannot know the exhilaration of the heights. They who do not journey afield must needs lose the reward! At last—to stand upon the rugged summit! To reach the highest point of rock and to look off across a tumbled country of mountains and valleys to rolling hills and fertile plains. Overhead is the clear sky without a cloud in all the wide expanse of blue. It spreads to meet the earth sleeping in the sunshine and in this meeting there is an indescribable vagueness.

The outlook for one on the loftiest peak of the Presidential Range is superb on such a day. Stupendous is

the scene. The climber knows the thrill of the high places as he stands in the open air beneath the wide sky. It is no wonder that the Psalmist of Palestine ascribes to the Lord "the strength of the hills." Ranges and peaks stand out seemingly near at hand, though one feels somewhat isolated by the sheer falling away of the summit on the south, and by the ravines on the north. Lakes and rivers are bright silver in the distance: hills roll away to the horizon like billows of the open sea, while here and there towns and cities and the nearer villages may be discerned. The magnitude of this outlook upon the mighty grandeur of natural wonders stirs one's soul to feel with him of old who exclaimed, "What is man that thou art mindful of him!" So it is in the onward movement of the world as decade follows decade on into the centuries of time.

One cannot remain always on the heights. The mount of vision has ever been a place of supreme attraction, but the real task of life calls for and demands honest toil in the low lands. Not without purpose did the New Testament historian state that Peter the Apostle was summoned direct from his vision by the inquiries of three men who were seeking him. Our Lord left the scene of glorious Transfiguration to render needful service at the base of the mountain. It must be in the strength of the remembered "Vision splendid" that we toil in the darkness. As a church, reviewing the lessons of sixty years of labor, we must hold to the ideal revealed on some Mount of Vision. We must continue to go out into the field of the world preaching and teaching and living the righteousness that exalteth a nation, as a "Church of the Living God." From the mountain

top of today we must descend, for tomorrow we are to begin anew our journeying. Duty calls us; men must go about their business, and women must resume their daily tasks. Even here let us not hurry too greatly. The descent from the top of a mountain is generally quite as perilous as the upward climb. A fall from the height is dangerous if not fatal. One must step cautiously and with care lest he slip in working his way over the rough places. However the climber has opportunity, ever and anon, to gaze far off over the fair scene, and to take in somewhat of the beautiful and the marvellous.

So we must start to retrace our steps from this anniversary mountain top. Down, down, down, by rocky ledge and grassy slope, our way lies toward a constantly lowering sun. Our great day is passing. The clear atmosphere of high noon has already given way among the lower ranges to a thin purple haze which seems to come from far-away hills and fill the nearer valleys. The day will soon come to its close. A calmness pervades the air. One almost feels a certain indefinable peace creeping into his life. There is an awe-inspiring quietness. The deep gulf close at hand seems deeper and darker as the shadows lengthen. Behind and above looms the mountain top bathed in sunlight, glorified and heightened in the declining rays. Before us—indeed all about us—the rising sea of haze is suffused with hues of violet and purple. We hasten on. Near the base of the mountain we enter the vale of shadows, for the line of sunlight and shade is steadily creeping toward the height. The sun is fast sinking behind the western ridges which appear just now to lift themselves from space. Beams of violet and orange light make glorious

the deep purple. For a brief moment the rim of the sun is on the hills, and then disappears; almost startling in its gorgeousness is the brilliancy of the yellow gold on the horizon, then an enchanting splendor of mystical light spreads across the sky, then a fiery haze, then a fading away in the gathering gloom which hastens down—for even the brightest of days must end. The early evening air is chill, and in the valley can be heard the cold splash of the rushing mountain stream. It is night.

But the vision of the mountain is with us, and the glorious splendor of the sunset gives promise of fairness for the coming day—the day which always follows night—when the dawn overcomes the darkness and the shadows flee away.

